

Central Regional Report

Environmental Supports for Physical Activity and Healthy Eating

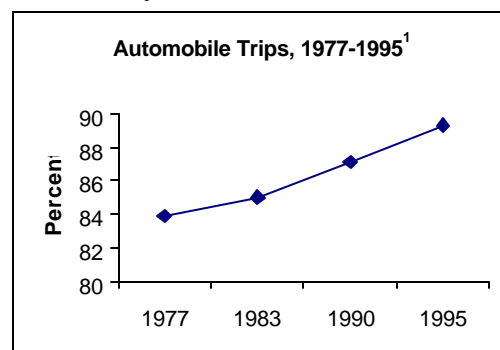
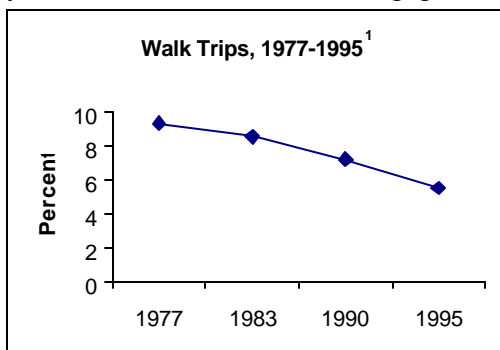
Background

Recently new strategies were introduced to reduce the number of deaths from cardiovascular disease (CVD)—Missouri's number one killer. The traditional public health strategy was to increase awareness and provide individualized services to aid people in adopting healthy behaviors. The current approach looks at the communities in which we expect people to perform these behaviors. These strategies, called policy and environmental changes, address the fact that our communities have become difficult places for us to be healthy.

Physical Activity

A lack of physical activity increases one's risk of developing and dying from CVD. However, today's environment discourages even one of the most routine forms of physical activity—walking. Our passion for the automobile has led us to create communities where it is easy to drive, but difficult to walk or bike.

- ♥ Trips made by walking have decreased by more than 40% since 1977.
- ♥ ¼ of all trips people make are one mile or less, but ¾ of these short trips are made by car.
- ♥ Walking and biking among children 5 to 15 years of age declined 40% between 1977 and 1995.
- ♥ Only 20.2% of Missouri adults engaged in regular physical activity in 2000.



Problems with crime and traffic, issues regarding whether or not communities and facilities are pleasant places to be active, and access to sites for physical activity combine to form a host of potential barriers to daily, moderate physical activity.

Healthy Eating

Healthy eating is essential for cardiovascular health. Unfortunately, our environment often encourages low quality food choices and makes nutritious choices difficult.

- ♥ Individuals eat out more often; meals are prepared in the home less frequently.
- ♥ Portion sizes continue to grow.
- ♥ Fast food chains exist virtually everywhere—even within schools.
- ♥ Vending machines in many of our schools offer high calorie, low nutrient food choices.
- ♥ Only 20.7% of Missouri adults ate 5 or more servings of fruits and vegetables per day in 2000.

With so many obstacles to eating well, it's no wonder that overweight and obesity, significant risk factors for CVD, have reached epidemic proportions.

What Can Be Done?

The next section presents a review of how individuals in your region of the state perceived the status of some key supports for healthy eating and physical activity. We hope you will use this information to begin considering strategies that you could implement in your region to impact heart health from a policy and environmental standpoint.

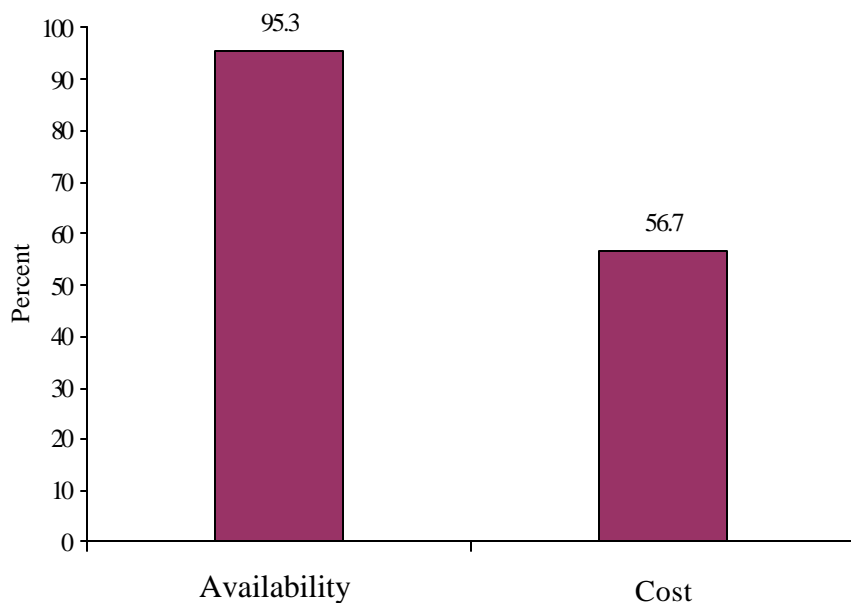
Survey Background and Methods

In 1998, the Missouri Department of Health, now the Department of Health and Senior Services (DHSS) was funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to address high rates of CVD in the state through policy and environmental interventions. Three regions were initially targeted (Bootheel, Central, and St. Louis) with the addition of Kansas City through supplemental funds. In order to determine the barriers to physical activity and healthy eating in the intervention communities, it is important to understand how individuals perceive their environment. Therefore, in 1999, DHSS implemented a “special survey” to assess perceived policy and environmental conditions in these regions as they relate to physical activity and healthy eating. Respondents were adults, 18 years and older, from the four regions listed, living in households with a telephone. Households were selected through a random-digit-dialing procedure. A total of 2,821 interviews were conducted. Central Region counties surveyed included: Dent, Iron, St. François and Washington.

Healthy Eating

Poor nutrition is a contributing factor to a host of chronic diseases, including CVD. Sixty-five percent of survey respondents in the Central region reported eating fewer than the recommended five servings of fruits and vegetables per day.

Perceptions Regarding Fruit & Vegetable Availability and Cost Central Region, 1999



♥ Over 95% of respondents felt that they had access to fresh fruits and vegetables.

♥ More than half of respondents indicated that fruits and vegetables were expensive, and of those who felt they were expensive, about 30% stated that there have been times when the costs have kept them from making a purchase.



Regional Strategy

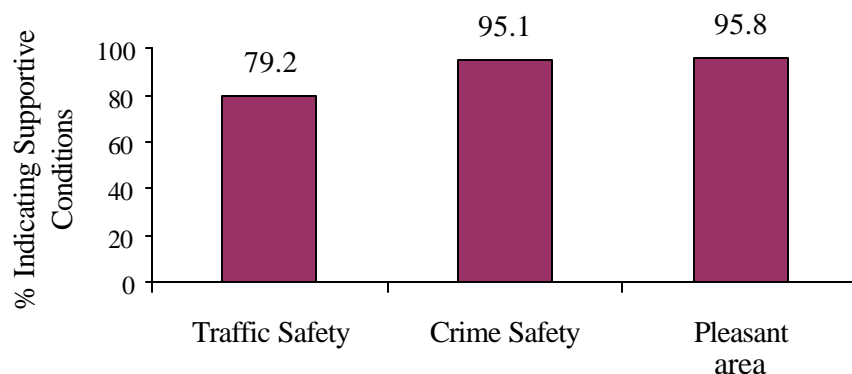
Access to fruits and vegetables does not seem to be a problem in the Central region. However, strategies that address their cost could promote consumption. Collaboration with area grocery stores to offer sales on produce, exploring coupon programs for low-income families, and/or establishing farmer's markets and community gardens might effectively address this barrier.

Additionally, as more and more individuals eat their meals away from home, encouraging restaurants to offer and identify heart healthy options becomes a key strategy. This is especially important because only 30% of respondents in the Central Region indicated that all or many of the restaurants in their community identify healthy choices on their menus.

Physical Activity

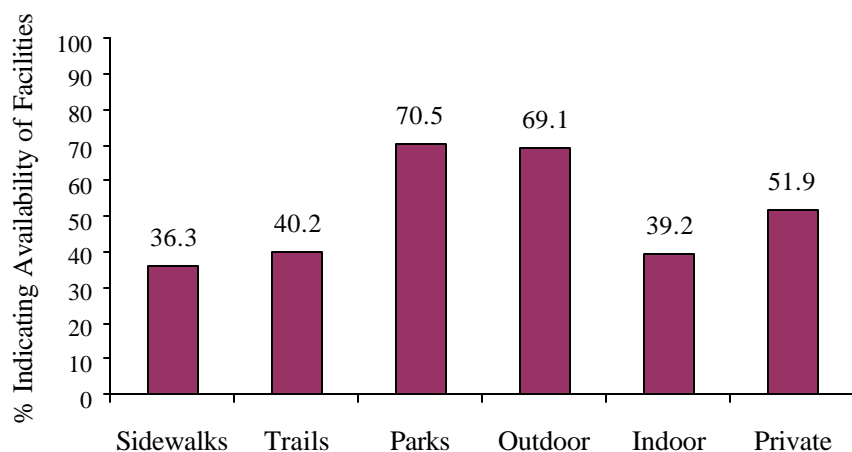
Of those surveyed in the Central Region, about 36% reported no leisure time physical activity, placing them at an increased risk for CVD.

**Perceived Prevalence of Conditions
Supportive of Physical Activity
Central Region, 1999**



♥ Over 79% of individuals surveyed in the Central Region indicated that it was safe (in regard to traffic and crime) and pleasant to walk, run, or bike in their neighborhood or community.

**Perceived Prevalence of Places for Physical Activity
Central Region, 1999**



♥ Approximately 36% of respondents indicated that there were sidewalks in their neighborhood or community.

♥ About 40% noted the availability of walking/biking trails; while over 70% said there were parks for walking/biking.

♥ Significantly more people felt that there were public outdoor facilities (e.g., basketball or tennis courts, running tracks) than public indoor facilities (e.g., school gyms, swimming pools).

♥ About half of the respondents felt that private exercise facilities such as gyms or health clubs were available.

Additionally, of those individuals who reported that they had access to trails, parks, and public outdoor/indoor facilities, over 93% reported them to be safe (in regard to crime), over 96% reported the trails and parks to be pleasant (e.g., trees, proper lighting, no trash); and over 91% indicated that the indoor/outdoor facilities were in good condition and available at convenient hours.

Regional Strategy

A great number of individuals in the Central region do not get enough physical activity. However, strategies exist to make it easier for people to become physically active. Efforts could be made to increase the number of walking/biking trails and indoor facilities for physical activity, as a high percentage of individuals in the Central Region did not think either were available. Partnering represents a good way of extending limited resources to accomplish such strategies. For example, some communities have worked with area schools to keep gyms open after hours for community use.

A Heart Healthy Community

A host of policy and environmental strategies exist that can help a community, rural or urban, change their nutrition and physical activity environments. Here are some examples from around the state:

- ♥ In Mercer County, land that was donated to a city was bulldozed into a walking trail;
- ♥ Polk County established a community garden that provides fresh produce for a local senior organization;
- ♥ Pulaski County established a policy that kept two local schools open before and after hours to provide community members convenient, safe places to walk in all sorts of weather;
- ♥ Douglas County worked with area restaurants to increase the number of heart healthy choices on their menus; and,
- ♥ Clark County has repaired sidewalks and designated a new walking path in one city that connects the school to the neighborhoods.

Should our nutrition and physical activity environments continue to deteriorate, so will our health. Therefore, impacting the policies and environmental conditions of our communities is critical in order to restore them to places where it is easy to be active and easy to eat well.

Missouri's Cardiovascular Health Program is dedicated to reducing illness and death associated with CVD through innovative policy and environmental initiatives that address physical inactivity and unhealthy eating. Many more creative methods exist to change the environment in your region. To explore additional ideas to meet the specific needs of your region, for technical assistance, or additional references, contact:

Cardiovascular Health Program
Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services
1-800-316-0935

Help make your region heart healthy.

Polk County Community Garden



References

1. Nationwide Personal Transportation Survey. US Department of Transportation, Federal Highway Administration, Research and Technical Support Center. Lanham, MD: Federal Highway Administration, 1997.

